

Independence Creek

CA-010-057

INDEPENDENCE CREEK WILDERNESS STUDY AREA (WSA)

(CA-010-057)

1. THE STUDY AREA --- 6,458 acres

The Independence Creek WSA is located in central Inyo County, approximately eight miles south of Independence, California. The WSA includes 6,458 acres of Bureau of Land Management (BLM) land and no State or private land (see Map 1 and Table 1).

The northern boundary follows a maintained road paralleling George Creek to the east. The boundary turns south and follows an irregular pattern adjacent to non-public land until it joins a maintained road. The boundary travels west along this road turning north at the Inyo National Forest boundary. The western edge of the WSA follows the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) boundary until it intersects the road paralleling George Creek on the north.

The WSA lies in the transition zone of the Basin and Range and the Sierra Nevada geomorphic provinces. Composed of sedimentary outwash from the Sierra Nevada mountain range, the WSA consists of a broad, rocky, alluvial apron at the eastern base of the Sierra. The WSA gently slopes downward to the east. Elevation ranges from 4,000 feet to 5,600 feet. Topographical relief is generally uniform providing little variation in the landscape. Shallow dry washes are scattered throughout the unit. The northern portion of the unit is traversed by George Creek which is a perennial stream. The WSA is composed of mixed desert shrubs.

The WSA was studied under Section 603 of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA). Various suitability recommendations were analyzed in the Draft and Final Environmental Impact Statements (EIS) for the Benton-Owens Valley/Bodie-Coleville Wilderness Study Areas. A summary of the area's wilderness values was included in the Final EIS. Two different suitability recommendations were analyzed in the EISs: all wilderness and no wilderness.

2. RECOMMENDATION AND RATIONALE --- 0 acres recommended
for wilderness
6,458 BLM acres recommended
for nonwilderness

No wilderness is the recommendation for this WSA. The entire acreage in this WSA is released for uses other than wilderness. The all-wilderness alternative is considered to be the environmentally-preferred alternative, as it would result in the least change from the natural environment over the long term. The no-wilderness alternative will be implemented in a manner which will use all practical means to avoid or minimize environmental impacts.

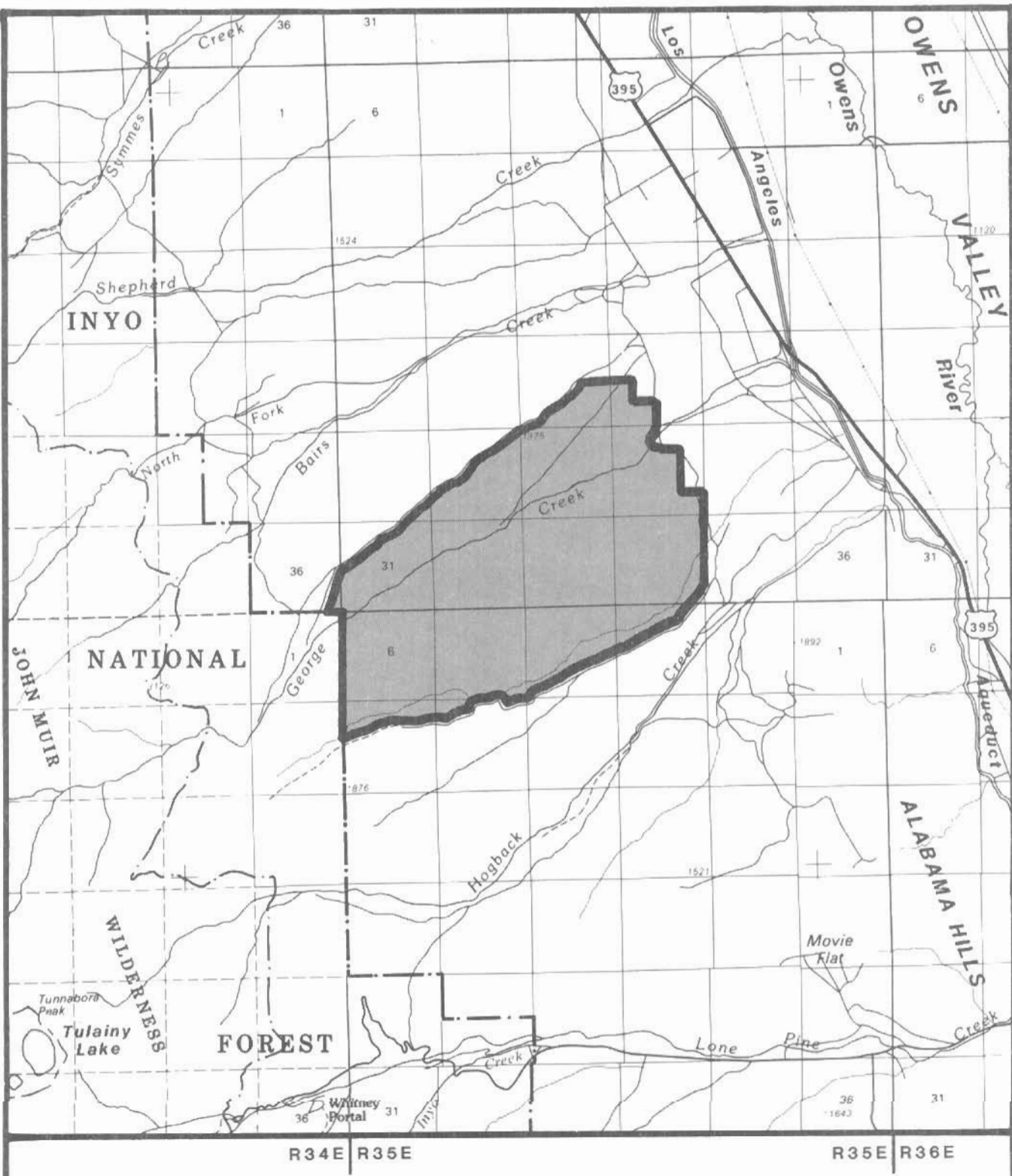
The WSA is recommended non-suitable because it contains marginal wilderness values that lack significant or unique special features. As a result, the

WSA is considered to possess low overall wilderness quality. Manageability was a consideration in the non-suitable recommendation.


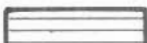

Solitude is limited along the eastern boundary due to the outside influence of U.S. Highway 395. This highway is a main transportation corridor between Los Angeles and other points to the north. It is used regularly and lies one to two miles east of the WSA.

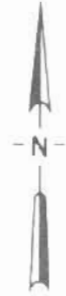
The WSA reflects an environment that has little topographic relief and as a result is visually bland. It portrays a landform and vegetation that is generally displayed along the eastern base of the Sierra Nevada. The WSA's vegetative patterns, forms and textures blend together into a monotonous landform. Ribbon-like George Creek provides the major visual contrast in the unit. Although the unit contains the prerequisite wilderness values to qualify as a WSA, it lacks the significant and unique values to enhance or diversify the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS). This low overall wilderness quality was a primary consideration in the non-suitable recommendation.

The WSA's relatively flat topography could make the unit difficult to manage as wilderness. The outside sights and sounds of U.S. Highway 395 and a county maintenance yard are apparent from the eastern edge of the unit. The WSA also lacks easily identifiable boundary features along the eastern boundary as well as a lack of natural barriers to prevent off-highway vehicle use. Vehicles such as four-wheel drives, motorcycles, all-terrain vehicles and mountain bikes can easily go off the boundary roads in this sparsely vegetated WSA. There are approximately eight miles of primitive routes which will remain available for vehicular use.



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|---|------|---|
|  | NONE | RECOMMENDED FOR WILDERNESS |
|  | | RECOMMENDED FOR NONWILDERNESS |
|  | | LAND OUTSIDE WSA RECOMMENDED FOR WILDERNESS |

- | | |
|---|--------------|
|  | SPLIT ESTATE |
|  | STATE |
|  | PRIVATE |



**Independence Creek
Proposal
MAP-1**



010-057
JUNE, 1988

TABLE 1 - Land Status and Acreage Summary of the Study Area

<u>Within Wilderness Study Area</u>		<u>Acres</u>
BLM	(surface and subsurface)	6,458
Split Estate	(BLM surface only)	0
Inholdings		
State		0
Private		0
Total		6,458
<u>Within the Recommended Wilderness Study Boundary</u>		<u>Acres</u>
BLM	(within WSA)	0
BLM	(outside WSA)	0
Split Estate	(within WSA)	0
Split Estate	(outside WSA)	0
Total BLM Land Recommended for Wilderness		0
Inholdings		
State		0
Private		0
<u>Within the Area Not Recommended for Wilderness</u>		<u>Acres</u>
BLM	(surface and subsurface)	6,458
Split Estate	(BLM surface only)	0
Total BLM Land Not Recommended for Wilderness		6,458

3. CRITERIA CONSIDERED IN DEVELOPING THE WILDERNESS RECOMMENDATIONS

A. Wilderness Characteristics

1. Naturalness: The Independence Creek WSA has retained its overall naturalness. The WSA slopes gently eastward from the base of the Eastern Sierra and consists of a broad alluvial fan. The terrain is uniform with numerous shallow washes.

Two distinct vegetation types exist in this WSA. The upper elevation western quarter of the WSA is dominated by Great Basin big sagebrush and bitterbrush. The remaining portion of the WSA is a mixed desert shrub type dominated by blackbrush and goldenbush. George Creek contains succulent riparian zones of willows and waterbirch.

The WSA has been affected by a few man-made imprints. These imprints consist of primitive vehicle routes totaling approximately two miles. The vehicle routes are substantially

unnoticeable because of the dense vegetation extending from the edge of the route. In addition, there is a fenceline in the WSA as well as water-spreading and diversion channels. Overall, the unit's large size makes these improvements imperceptible except on a localized basis.

2. Solitude: The WSA's size contributes to the area's outstanding opportunities for solitude. There is adequate room to roam throughout the WSA without feeling the presence of man's influence. However, outside influences of U.S. Highway 395 and other cultural features are visible from within the WSA, primarily along the WSA's eastern periphery.

This WSA is periodically overflowed by military aircraft as part of the national defense mission taking place in approved military operating areas and flight corridors. The visual intrusions and associated noise create periodic temporary effects on solitude which are deemed necessary and acceptable as a part of the defense preparedness of the nation.

3. Primitive and unconfined recreation: The WSA provides opportunities for primitive and unconfined types of recreation. These opportunities include trout fishing, hiking, hunting, camping, and other activities. Visual amenities are minimal due to uniformity of landform character within the WSA.
4. Special features: The unit contains several features of noteworthy significance. It contains George Creek and associated riparian habitat which is an essential micro-environment for local flora and fauna who rely on the water source to exist within the desert ecosystem of Owens Valley. The creek is located in the northern portion of the WSA and contains brown and rainbow trout. In addition, the WSA contains crucial winter habitat for mule deer who rely on this area for forage requirements during the harsh Sierra high-country winters.

B. Diversity in the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS)

1. Assessing the diversity of natural systems and features as represented by ecosystems: This WSA contains 6,458 acres of the Intermountain Sagebrush/Great Basin Sagebrush ecosystem. The Independence Creek WSA would not increase the diversity of the types of ecosystems represented in the NWPS.

Table 2 - Ecosystem Representation

Bailey-Kuchler Classification Domain/Province/PNV	NWPS Areas		Other BLM Studies	
	areas	acres	areas	acres
<u>NATIONWIDE</u>				
Intermountain Sagebrush/ Great Basin Sagebrush	1	32,407	55	1,198,817
<u>CALIFORNIA</u>				
Intermountain Sagebrush/ Great Basin Sagebrush	0	0	19	214,351

2. Expanding the opportunities for solitude or primitive recreation within a day's driving time (five-hours) of major population centers: The WSA is within a five-hour drive of seven major population centers. Table 3 summarizes the number and acreage of designated areas and other BLM study areas within a five-hour drive of the population centers.

Table 3 - Wilderness Opportunities for Residents of Major Population Centers

Population Centers	NWPS Areas		Other BLM Studies	
	areas	acres	areas	acres
<u>California</u>				
Anaheim-Santa Ana	25	2,823,534	153	5,703,515
Bakersfield	32	4,071,358	128	3,998,548
Los Angeles-Long Beach	27	2,876,234	135	4,958,751
Oxnard-Ventura	23	2,195,198	85	2,703,260
Riverside-San Bernardino	22	2,031,054	205	7,658,649
<u>Nevada</u>				
Las Vegas	46	3,507,293	311	11,186,463
Reno	39	4,647,230	175	6,904,809

3. Balancing the geographic distribution of wilderness areas: The WSA is within 50 air miles of nine BLM WSAs recommended for wilderness designation. Sequoia-Kings Canyon National Park and the John Muir Wilderness, two and six miles to the west, respectively, are the nearest designated wilderness areas. These wilderness areas are administered by the National Park Service and the Inyo National Forest, respectively. Other nearby designated wilderness areas include the Golden Trout Wilderness and the Ansel Adams Wilderness, which are managed by the Inyo National Forest.

C. Manageability

The Independence Creek WSA is manageable as wilderness, but only with some difficulty. The unit's gently sloping landscape and its sparse vegetation make the WSA very susceptible to indiscriminate off-highway vehicle use. Most of the WSA is vulnerable to vehicle encroachment. Additionally, the outside sights and sounds of U.S. Highway 395, located one to two miles east of the WSA, detract from solitude along the eastern boundary. Finally, the irregular eastern boundary feature makes on-the-ground identification of the unit boundary difficult.

Frequent signing, fencing most of the border, intensive patrolling and providing detailed maps would be required to insure the integrity of the unit.

Military overflights in this WSA must be considered to maintain the integrity of the existing and future national defense mission as well as the wilderness resource.

D. Energy and Mineral Resource Values

1. Summary of information known at the time of the preliminary suitability recommendation: The Independence Creek Wilderness Study Area (WSA) is in the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Alabama Geology-Energy-Minerals (G-E-M) Resource Area (GRA). BLM G-E-M data used in the Affected Environment section of the Benton-Owens Valley Bodie-Coleville Study Areas Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) in 1987 indicated that the Independence Creek WSA has low potential for metallic minerals, uranium, thorium, and geothermal resources. The EIS states that there is moderate occurrence potential for non-metallic minerals due to the presence of alluvium on most of the WSA. The EIS stated that non-metallic minerals, such as sand and gravel, have low development potential due to the unknown quality of this material in the WSA and its ample availability outside the WSA. The EIS states that there was no potential for oil and gas in the WSA. The G-E-M report states that gold was produced from a quartz vein in section 11, T. 15 S., R. 35 E., one to two miles from the southern boundary of the WSA and that gold-bearing quartz veins and a zone of hydrothermal alteration exists at the Alabama-Mohawk Mine (sec. 11, T. 35 E., R. 15 S.) one to one and one-half miles from the WSA boundary. The G-E-M report states that there were some placer claims in alluvial deposits in the WSA. There were two inactive mining claims in the northwest corner of the WSA in 1987.
2. Summary of significant new mineral resource data collected since the suitability recommendation which should be considered in the final recommendation: No U.S. Geologic Survey (USGS) or U.S. Bureau of Mines (BOM) mineral surveys were conducted in this WSA. No new data has been generated for this WSA since the EIS of 1987.

E. Impacts on Resources

The following table summarizes the effects on pertinent resources for all alternatives considered including designation or non-designation of the entire area as wilderness. (For a full explanation of this summary, refer to the Benton-Owens Valley/Bodie-Coleville Wilderness - Final Environmental Impact Statement.)

Table 4 - Comparative Summary of the Impacts by Alternative

ISSUE-RELATED RESOURCES	PROPOSED ACTION (NO-WILDERNESS/NO ACTION)	ALL-WILDERNESS ALTERNATIVE
Wilderness Values	There would be only very minor and short-term impacts on the wilderness values of naturalness and solitude in portions of the WSA. A proposed prescribed burn would have a short-term impact on naturalness (1,800 acres) and solitude (3-month period) values. Twenty-five additional cattle would use the denuded area after vegetation had become reestablished, thus slightly affecting naturalness. Maintenance of existing and proposed range facilities as well as existing water-spreading and diversion channels would slightly affect solitude in local areas for short periods of time and impair the perception of naturalness on less than 100 acres.	The net effect of the management actions would be a slight enhancement of long-term protection to wilderness values. Closure of area to motor vehicle use, prohibitions of the proposed prescribed burn, and a decrease in vehicle use associated with maintenance of existing range improvements and existing livestock driveway use would provide some, albeit low, benefits to the area's wilderness values. In addition, long-term security from unanticipated adverse future actions such as mineral exploration and development would be provided.
Motorized Recreation Use	There would be no impact on motorized recreation use which is expected to remain at the current 500 visitor-days per year.	Motorized recreation use totaling 500 visitor-days would be foregone. This would result in only a minor impact as opportunities for motorized recreation use are available on other public lands outside the WSA, and the boundary roads would provide access to those recreation users that wish to continue using the area without vehicles.

Table 4 - Comparative Summary of the Impacts by Alternative (Cont'd)

ISSUE-RELATED RESOURCES	PROPOSED ACTION (NO-WILDERNESS/NO ACTION)	ALL-WILDERNESS ALTERNATIVE
Livestock Grazing and Range Improvements	There would be no impact to livestock grazing and range improvements. All existing operations and proposed projects would be permitted, including a 1,800-acre prescribed burn to increase forage production by 100 AUMs to a total of 653 AUMs.	Prohibiting a proposed 1,800-acre prescribed burn would result in foregoing an opportunity to increase livestock forage by 100 AUMs. Current livestock operations are not dependent upon this increase therefore there would only be a minor impact.

F. Local Social and Economic Considerations

No local social or economic considerations were identified in the Final EIS. Therefore, no further discussion of this topic will occur in this document.

G. Summary of WSA - Specific Public Comments

During the inventory phase, a comment was received which addressed the WSA's potential for ground water recharge facilities.

After the inventory, comments were received during the wilderness study process. Several comments noted that the adjacent USFS RARE II lands add to the WSA's wilderness values. One comment noted that the existing water-spreading and flood channels require maintenance of related roads and trails. One comment noted the scenic values of the WSA, while one comment stated that the WSA did not meet wilderness standards.

During the study phase, a public meeting and public hearing were held in association with the draft EIS. The public meeting was held in Markleeville, California, and the public hearing in Bishop, California. Comments were received both orally through the hearing, and in writing during the 90-day public review period. A total of 83 written and oral comments were received. Forty-one comments supported the Bureau's no-wilderness recommendation. Forty-two comments supported the all-wilderness alternative. No Federal agency comments were received specific to this WSA. The California Department of Fish and Game recommended that vehicle use in the study area be confined to existing roads and trails.

The Inyo County Board of Supervisors has passed a resolution opposing any additional wilderness areas in Inyo County.